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ABSTRACT

Nine deaf students (8-9 years old) participated in the Magic Circle program, a human development program designed to improve self-concept, relationships with others, and academics. Students met as a group with the school social worker for 15-30 minute sessions. The program focused on three main experiences: awareness, mastery of self-confidence and responsible competence, and social interaction. Reports from the social worker, students, teacher, and observer indicated results such as improved language development, increased attentiveness in the classroom, and improved relationships with others. (LS)

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FINGER SPELLERS AND THE "MAGIC CIRCLE"

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FINGER SPELLERS AND THE "MAGIC CIRCLE"

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Why!

For the past decade educators in America have been advocating that a more humanistic approach must find its way into our educational system.

Historically, if you appraise the American educational system, very few changes have been made in its basic make-up since its inception. The same basic pattern has remained although we, as a nation, have moved from a rural, agrarian immobile society to an urban, industrial, mobile society. The family, in early America was the focal point and there were many hours of parent/child interactions. The role of education then was to teach the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic with provisions for acquainting students with the world outside of their own immediate community. With the advent of increased parental employment, radio and television, etc., the role of our educational institutions has had to be re-defined. Part of this new role has been to complement the adult/child and child/child interactions of the home. That part of each child that helps him begin to understand and value his own self-worth. The educational system has not forsaken its knowledge centered curriculum but it has opened its doors to concerns for the whole child as a learning, feeling, sensitive human being.

Many different programs have been created to assist educators in meeting these needs in children such as: Values Clarification[1], Transactional Analysis[2], and "Magic Circle"[3]. Their titles may differ but their philosophy, goals and objectives are basically the same. The use of group techniques is also a basic similarity. These programs are

being used with children who are seen as culturally different, educationally or economically deprived or as the "average" child. Indications are that children who are being exposed to these experiences are making positive changes in their school experiences and achievement[4]. If this is the trend and there are positive results, then it would seem to follow that the program should be provided for all children, including physically disabled children in residential settings, such as schools for the deaf and the blind.

In working with the School Social Workers, teachers and counselors at the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind, I often heard comments about the feelings of insecurities that deaf children displayed, their lack of self-confidence, their inability to relate to others and their over sensitiveness about their disability. Grace Harris[5], in her book on deaf children, states that "The child must have the opportunity to play out his feelings and his thoughts, and to struggle like all children to put his feelings into words".

The rationale for this project stems from a belief that the introduction and use of a human development program, with deaf children, will assist them in making changes not only in their self-concept and relationship with others but also in their academics.

No research was uncovered that could shed light on this concern. Thirty-six (36) states residential schools for the deaf were canvassed, thirty-six responses were returned and no school indicated that they had this type of human development program in progress. One school mentioned a program on human growth and development based on Erikson and Piaget, Redl and Wineman and one school indicated a total unawareness of any human development programs.

The "Magic Circle" Program

The theory behind the "Magic Circle" program is the belief that a soundly based preventive scheme has to focus on three main experiences:

1. Awareness - to know what one is really seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, saying and doing. If a child is fundamentally aware, he has all his inner and outer channels or receptors open.
2. Mastery - is composed of two conceptual and developmental stages; self-confidence and responsible competence.

   Self-confidence refers to the acquisition of useful knowledge in such a manner that a person comes to believe in himself as a capable human being. The self-confident child correctly believes himself to be competent; he experiences himself as a person who can and will succeed; he knows that he can cope with challenge and hence, is not afraid of it; he is ready.

   Responsible competence means the harmonious behavioral intergration of knowledge and skills.
3. Social Interaction - to learn how to relate to other individuals. To know how one affects others and that one has the ability to affect others positively or negatively. Also, to assist the child's prediction or guessing the feelings of other people and then to check the accuracy of his estimates.

The Process

The process involved a facilitator and a group of six to eight children in sessions lasting from fifteen to thirty minutes. Three basic rules for the group were:

1. Everyone gets a turn if he wants it;
2. Everyone listens to what is being said;
3. And what ever is said is accepted (not made fun of, laughed at or questioned).

Skills for the facilitator involved:

1. Active Listening - giving eye contact, asking open-ended questions, etc.
2. Focusing on Feelings - going from experiences to feelings, accept all feelings.
3. Giving Recognition - learning names, thanking for sharing.
4. Paraphrasing Ineffective Listening - using the same words or others to repeat the experience given.
5. Reviewing - either you or participants repeating what others have said so far.
6. Focusing on Similarities and Differences - showing them how much the same they are and that their differences are not a bad thing.
7. Involving Everyone - encouraging the reticent child, dealing with disrupters through touch, remembering the child who does not participate, giving him an early turn tomorrow.
8. Transferring Leadership - offering leadership to children as you perceive that they are ready.

Where, With Whom and By Whom!

This study took place in Florida School for the Deaf and continued on until the end of the 73-74 school year.

There were nine students* in the study, seven girls and two boys; four were eight years of age and five were nine years of age; two were

*The names of the students have been changed.

Black, one of Mexican descent, one of Puerto Recan descent and four Caucasians. Only one child in the study lives at home in St. Augustine and not at the school. All except one child uses finger spelling and a limited oral language.

The facilitator of the group was the School Social Worker who had been through the Magic Circle training program. This was her first experience in running a continuous group and it was also the first time that the school had offered this type of group experience to their students.

The classroom teacher, of the students, was involved by sharing with us what she saw happening in the classroom that appeared to be a carry-over from the "Magic Circle" experience.

Reports from both the School Social Worker and the classroom teacher were to be made on a regular basis.

REPORTING PERIODS

In this part of the study, I would like to look at four reporting periods, reflecting on the process as it evolved as well as pointing out progress and problems that occurred along the way.

The first reporting period, dated November 16, 1973, will give an initial identification of the students in the study and presents information about them as perceived by the School Social Worker and the teacher, both in and out of the "Circle".

The second and third reporting periods, dated December 5, 1973, and February 4, 1974, will reflect on the total group experiences as viewed by both the School Social Worker and the teacher and also from my experiences while sitting in on the group.

The fourth reporting period, dated May 14, 1974, will again look at the students individually and as a group. The comments included will have come from the children, school social worker, teacher and from my own observations.

November 16, 1973

Susan - age nine years, white female, lives with her parents and has one older brother. The social worker reports that she is a rather reserved child. She is very precise in the things that she wants to say and often labors over getting the correct syntax and spelling. She is liked by her peers and is a good listener.

Joann - age nine years, black female, lives with her divorced mother and is the youngest of six children. The social worker reports that she is a bright child, and is quick to catch errors made by her peers and doesn't hesitate to correct their errors in finger-spelling. She is beginning to learn how to constrain herself, to wait until others finish talking and to reflect without criticism.

Beth - age nine years, white female of Indian descent, lives with her parents, and is a day student. She has been legally adopted by her stepfather. The social worker reports that she is a wiggle worm in the circle. She is really having difficulty paying attention and taking part in what's happening.

Ann - age nine years, white female, lives with her parents and has both an older and a younger brother. The social worker reports that she is very self-centered and stubborn. She is constantly striving to be the center of attention. She began by refusing to follow direction, i.e.: sitting on the floor in the "circle", raising

her hand and "listening" while others talk, etc. By the end of the week, she began to show improvement. Her peers tend to ignore her, but if she becomes too distracting, they try to correct her behavior themselves.

Paula - age nine years, white female, lives with her parents and has one younger sister. The social worker reports that she is attentive and reflects the other children well. She is a happy child and is seemingly well accepted by her peers.

John - age nine years, black male, lives with his parents and is a middle child with five brothers and five sisters. The social worker reports that he is a good "listener" and nearly always reflects correctly what others have said. He is a quiet, mannerly child and is an asset to the "circle".

Mack - age nine years, white male of Puerto Rican descent, lives with his parents and has two brothers and one older sister. The social worker reports that he is very shy and quiet. He "listens" well and although he doesn't often reflect, when he does, he shows a great deal of understanding. He uses words describing emotions more than others. He is liked by his peers.

Shelly - age ten years, white female of Mexican descent, lives with her parents and has two brothers and four sisters, all of whom are older. The social worker reports that she is a cute chubby child. Her peers seem to like her. She does have difficulty paying attention and reflecting what others have said. She also seems to lack self-confidence.

Nancy - age nine years, white female, lives with her parents and has two brothers and one sister, all of whom are younger. The social

worker reports that she is a bright child, quick to criticize and correct her peers ability to finger-spell correctly. She wants to monopolize the conversation at times. She gets a great deal of satisfaction from reflecting what others have said.

In general, the social worker sees the "circle" as both interesting and challenging. For the students, having complete acceptance is new and surprising. They are beginning to show pleasure when someone reflects what they have been saying correctly. It's like they are thinking, "Wow, people really do care and know what I am saying". The primary problem is their limited vocabulary, particularly around words used to express feeling and emotions.

The teacher feels that there are already some signs of carry-over into the classroom. She has noticed that they are now beginning to do less interrupting of each other.

December 5, 1973

This was my first time sitting in on the "Circle" experience. The social worker introduced me to the students, discussed with them my reason for being there and they were also told that I would be taking notes and pictures of them. This seemed to be completely accepted by them and they moved on into their group experience with very little difficulty.

At the beginning of the session, they very quickly spelled out the three rules of the "Circle". After receiving their topic, they slowly began to share experiences. Sharing an experience seemed to satisfy them a great deal, the difficult part came with talking about the feelings that were involved. They continued to stay with words like happy and good, with almost no use of other words that would express positive

feelings.

There was a seriousness as they attempted to reflect what others had said. It appeared to be a slow learning process for them, yet one that they wanted to master. All of them were somewhat caught up in making grammatical and syntax corrections and were encouraged to concentrate more on the experience that was being shared.

The two boys in this group, at times, seemed out-numbered, but they did, however, share and were encouraged by the girls to do this.

In the classroom, I found them active in their response to the teacher's questions and very concerned that only one respond at a time. The teacher felt that this, and their improvement in grammar and syntax, were positive carry-overs from the "Circle" experience.

February 4, 1974

The following report is from the social worker.

"It is good to see signs of progress. The children now seem to have a real understanding of what we are trying to do in the "Circle". They are able to sit and watch each other "talk" without constantly trying to interrupt and correct grammatical errors. They are beginning to share more of their feelings. They are also beginning to see likenesses and differences in each other. Their acceptance of this is still weak.

"The major problem has been the language level of the children. Their vocabulary limitation hinders their ability to express their thoughts and feelings. At times, they have resorted to pantomime to convey something they have wanted to share, but have given up in frustration when unknown words were attached to these thoughts. Therefore, they often share something that they have gone over in the classroom because they have been exposed to the language and feel comfortable.

This has happened several times when I have given them a task and they insist on talking about something else. (This is improving, though, as they continue to develop a greater vocabulary.) At the present time, they over-use three words: happy, sad, and excited. A recent break-thru occurred the last time that we met. John shared an incident where he helped his father saw wood. When asked about how he felt about helping his father in this way, he replied, "I feel happy, excited, and strong".

"Each "Circle" reveals new evidence of language growth and the recognition that language is a media for expressing feelings.

"Problems include the meeting time. The children are often tired. If other activities have been planned, they feel that they are missing out by attending the "Circle" sessions.

"Our meeting place is not very suitable - too many distractions. Visually oriented deaf children don't miss a thing. They are constantly distracted by anyone passing the door or entering the room.

"The number of times that we meet has been shortened to three a week instead of five. The children seem to like this much better.

"The teacher informs me that there is carry-over into the class-room. The children often remind each other of the "Circle" rules and expect them to be just as valid in the classr-om setting.

"Believe it or not, the "Magic Circle" is breaking the "sound" barrier at Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind."

May 14, 1974

The report on this day will consist of four parts: (1) the soci worker's statements on where the students are at this time; (2) the children's statements about the "Circle" experience; (3) the teacher's

thoughts; and (4) some of my observations.

Susan - During the sessions she becomes very dependent on Beth. This continues to be apparent in almost everything that she does. She shared a great deal in the "Circle", but always felt a need to look to Beth for approval.

Joann - She has shown a dwindling interest in the "Circle". Her disgust for Ann, who tries to monopolize the experience, is very apparent.

Beth - She continues to want a great deal of attention. At times, she tries to talk while others are sharing.

Ann - There has not been a great deal of change in this child. She has problems getting along with her peers and being accepted. There are times when the others tune her out. She would like to be the "boss" of the "Circle" telling others what to do. She really needs more of these kinds of experiences.

Paula - She seems to enjoy the "Circle". She has been very much involved in all aspects of the experience.

John - He has had a very good understanding of the process and could take the leadership role at times. He shared many personal things freely with the group. He related very well to all of the children.

Mack - This experience has made him more relaxed. It pleased him to get attention from the others. He had no difficulty reflecting what others had said and toward the end, he began to volunteer more freely.

Shelly - At first, she was ill-at-ease in the group, but as she caught on to the process, this faded away and she shared freely. Her increased language development is very apparent. There is also a noticable increase in her self-confidence.

Nancy - She was ill a great deal of the time and missed many sessions. She shared well and learned to "listen". Her need to correct others diminished.

This experience has helped them learn that others have things to say that are important and worth "listening" to. They learned the rules of the "Circle" and were most dedicated in their desire to follow them. It has been interesting to see the improvement in their overall relationships as they discovered more about their likenesses and differences.

In this, the last session of the year, the students were asked to share their feelings about the experience. Two were absent and not able to reply to this. They all spoke of liking the experience and how it made them feel happy and excited. They also expressed positive feelings about having a time to share their experiences with others. They talked about a demonstration that they were involved in with the social worker's class, where others were learning about the "Circle" technique and it's use with students. All expressed a desire for continued "Circle" experiences.

The teacher felt that the whole experience had been very worthwhile for the students. One of the most positive carry-overs into the classroom was the increased attentiveness. There was also some apparent increase in vocabulary, grammar and syntax building. They seemed proud to be a part of the experience and talked about it frequently. This same kind of information was given to the dorm teachers by the students.

I visited in the group twice, once at the beginning and again at the end. I could see very clearly some of the changes in the children that had been enumerated by both the teacher and the social worker.

Findings and Conclusions

The main reason for this project was to expose deaf students to a process that would encourage and enable them to talk about feelings as they related some of their experiences. The sessions certainly gave us proof of the difficulty they have in dealing with this and it also afforded us an opportunity to see some changes take place. There certainly had been some language growth for these children and all of the experiences have had some carry-over into the classroom. The project was small but there has been enough interest in it to warrant the involvement of more staff and children next year.

If the project is continued, there are some areas of concern that must be addressed, such as:

- Although there was a working relationship between the school social worker and the teacher, it must be more closely correlated so that the flow of concerns and positive growth of the children can be addresses by both professionals.
- As the school social worker noted, the time period for this experience must be seriously considered. The time directly after the school day appeared to create a problem in many ways.
- The times for the session meetings should be set for regularity.
- A great deal of consideration must be given in reference to length of time as it takes these children longer to spell out their experiences and feelings. It also appears to be a more physically tiring experience for them.
- Both the school social worker and I felt that the themes for the sessions should move more quickly than they did. The slowness experienced may have been the cause of some inattentiveness of the students.

- An adequate anecdotal record-keeping system should be used in order to give the professionals involved a basis for helping the students.

It is hoped that "Circle" sessions will be instituted in the school again this year and it will be interesting to review the process and growth as it develops.

I am convinced more than ever now, that processes that are being used to assist hearing students grow and have new experiences in the affective domain can and should be used with all students and perhaps especially with those who have physical disabilities.

FOOTNOTES

1 Simon, Sidney; Howe, Leland and Kirschenbaum, Howard, Values Clarification (Hart Publishing Company, Inc., New York 1972)

2 Harris, Thomas A., I'm OK - You're OK (Harper and Row, New York 1969)

3 Bessell, Harold, Methods in Human Development - Theory Manual (Human Development Training Institute, San Diego, California 1970 - Revision)

4 IPEC - Research Bulletin #1 - October 6, 1970

5 Harris, Grace, Language in the Pre-School Deaf Child (Greene and Stratton, New York 1971, Page 5)

6 Bessell, Harold, Methods in Human Development - Theory Manual (Human Development Training Institute, El Cajon, California, 1970 - Revision)